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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that three main barriers impede the ability of inner-city, low-income job seekers to find employment in the suburbs: an administrative or information barrier, a physical barrier, and a social barrier. The Bridges to Work demonstration program was designed to test the idea that improved access to suburban jobs can significantly improve outcomes for low-income urban workers and their neighborhoods. The elements of the Bridges to Work model are designed to address each of the three barriers described. Bridges elements include the following: (1) a placement mechanism across the metropolitan area to connect residents of inner-city neighborhoods to suburban job openings; (2) a targeted commute to allow residents to reach those suburban destinations; and (3) limited support services aimed at mitigating problems created or exacerbated by the daily commute to distant and unfamiliar job locations. Following 2 years of planning, 5 sites--in Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Milwaukee, and St. Louis--began 4 years of project operations in late 1996. The sites are designed to answer questions about the strategy, policy, concerns and funding shifts. At present, the five sites are grappling with immediate concerns: (1) administrative barriers among the agencies and jurisdictions involved; (2) physical barriers involving transportation providers; and (3) social barriers, including racism and lack of supportive services. (KC)

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GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE

The Bridges to Work Demonstration

First Report to the Field

By Beth F. Palatnick and Richardson H. Watson

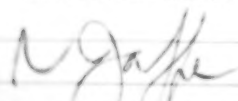
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GETTING FROM HERE TO THE

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Beth Z. Palubinsky and Bernardine H. Watson

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Public/Private Ventures · Philadelphia, Pennsylvania · Spring 1997

BACKGROUND

In the early 1990s, P/PV began to examine the increase in inner-city joblessness and the growing "suburbanization" of employment that had occurred in many major metropolitan areas of the United States over the past three decades. Our investigation showed that, in six of the nation's eight largest metropolitan regions, more than two-thirds of the jobs created during the 1980s were located in the suburbs; at the same time, inner-city poverty rates had become from two to five times higher than those in the suburbs of those regions.

The results of our examination highlight a problem seen often in the employment and training field: work-ready adults, including graduates of city-based job training programs, still face unemployment despite their training, partly because they have no access to the suburban job market where good entry-level jobs often abound. Further investigation identified three barriers to this access.

First, an administrative, or information, barrier keeps the inner-city job-seeker from employment in the suburbs. City-based job training programs typically have citywide rather than metropolitan-wide jurisdictions, which means they seldom place program participants into suburban jobs about which they have little information. Second, a physical, or transportation, barrier limits access. Even if program graduates obtain suburban jobs, they may be unable to get "from here to there." They may not have reliable automobiles and, for the most part, public transit supports suburb-to-city commuters, not those going the other way. Finally, the relatively lengthy commute to the suburbs heightens the need for supports, like child care, without which suburban access may be limited, especially for low-income workers trying to make the transition to self-sufficiency and keep a job somewhat far from home.

PLANNING THE DEMONSTRATION

In 1993—with the support of a consortium of private funders, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Federal Transit Administration—P/PV began to plan Bridges to Work, a demonstration designed to test the idea that improved access to suburban jobs can significantly improve outcomes for low-income urban workers and their neighborhoods. The elements of the Bridges to Work model are designed to address each of the three barriers described above. Bridges' elements are:

1. A metropolitanwide placement mechanism to connect residents of inner-city neighborhoods to suburban job openings;
2. A targeted commute to allow residents to reach those suburban destinations; and
3. Limited support services aimed at mitigating problems created or exacerbated by the daily commute to distant and unfamiliar job locations.

Nine sites participated in two years of planning, during which they attempted to build unusual metropolitanwide partnerships—we call them "collaboratives"—among city and suburban SDAs (Service Delivery Areas) and Private Industry Councils (PICs), community organizations, employer representatives, transportation providers, state and local human service providers, and others necessary to support the Bridges model. In the spring of 1996, five sites—Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Milwaukee and St. Louis—were selected to implement the model based on their demonstrated capacity to build, manage and sustain these complex new collaboratives. These sites began four full years of project operations in late 1996.

EARLY SUCCESS, ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Bridges was conceived and born in a complex, difficult time. Shrinking federal transit dollars, diminished funding for employment/training and human services, movement from categorical toward block-granted funding, and profound changes in the thinking of policymakers and the public about society's obligations to the poor, articulated most clearly in the new welfare legislation—all these currents put strains on the collaboratives' ability to stay together, plan and implement the Bridges demonstration.

But the collaboratives did stay intact and moved forward to plan the project and pull together the resources they would need to operate the three elements of Bridges. For though the national climate was changing, the local labor market landscape remained the same—poor people landlocked in urban neighborhoods, isolated from opportunities in job-rich suburbs by the lack of information and a ride.

By the fall of 1996, the sites completed their planning for Bridges and prepared for the demonstration's three- to six-month pilot phase. This would be the Bridges "road test": a trial period in which the sites would provide placement, transportation and support services to a small number of participants, before the rigors of research and full-fledged operations would begin.

A key goal of the demonstration is to generate information for policymakers and decisionmakers about Bridges' "mobility" approach, which focuses on the realities of current metropolitan settlement patterns and the demands of the labor market. Because Bridges to Work has a rigorous evaluation design, we expect to be able to provide critical information about how Bridges is most effectively implemented and its impact on the lives of participants. We will also document and analyze the ways that the Bridges sites secure and package funding support.

During the pilot, program operators at four of the five project sites are testing all the operational elements of Bridges—the placement, transportation and support services mechanisms—with a small number of participants who will not "count" as part of the sites' research samples. Full-fledged operations, and the research, will not begin until late spring 1997, when these four sites each begin to enroll and serve 800 persons whose activities and outcomes in Bridges we will follow and assess. In the fifth Bridges city, the project's operators will attempt to place 1500 workers without having to comply with the rigorous requirements of the research design. At this site, P/PV will document the challenges of going "to scale" as quickly and with as many persons as possible.

To date, cooperation among institutions and across regional lines has been impressive. At the same time, some issues and challenges have emerged from the implementation of what appears to be a simple solution to the problem of spatial mismatch—a bridge built of transportation, placement and limited support services. These issues and challenges go to the heart of two big questions about the Bridges to Work approach: does it work, and what does it take to make it work?

Bridging the administrative barrier between the poor and suburban opportunity

Bridges requires the participation of institutions and individuals that have typically functioned inside distinct jurisdictions or geographies, their missions often overlapping but their activities largely separated by law, regulation or local tradition. To qualify at the earliest stage for a planning grant, a prospective Bridges site had to assemble a collaborative of players from throughout the metropolitan region—a lead CBO with employment/training experience, an experienced transportation provider (public or private), an experienced human services provider, and a "convener"—an agency able to keep them all at the table through a lengthy and complicated planning process.

P/PV required that interested regions use the collaborative structure because we were convinced that a cure for spatial mismatch would not be found without genuine, bottom-up buy-in and planning involving both city and suburb. But we required more than merely a structure for the planning groups. We required that they collaborate around the concrete concept that came out of our knowledge-gathering: that the solution to a region's city-suburb mismatch would require the implementation of the three key elements of our proposed mobility-for-work strategy.

We did not expect that Bridges would or should mitigate all the individualism, territoriality and protectionism that often characterize relations among agencies and between city and suburb. We did, though, expect them to lower the barriers that typically impede success by committing to share their information, staff, facilities, experience and expertise to achieve the demonstration's goals.

Some sites have achieved success more easily than others. In one site, for example, there are growing mutual comfort and trust—born in the Bridges planning phase—between the city and suburban employment/training administrations, a relationship that has led to agreements to exchange information and share credits for job placements achieved through Bridges.

At another site, the collaborative met with such resistance to its placement plan—"job protectionism and racism" is how the convener describes it—from the PICs in the region's job-rich counties that the group abandoned its plan to build Bridges around a partnership between the city and suburban PICs. With the city administration still a strong member, the group held together, changed course and soon had established a promising relationship between one of the city's new one-stop employment centers and a major suburban business partnership, bypassing the suburban public employment/training system altogether.

In yet another city, the convener had determined early on that any number of the region's key employment/training agencies might play a part in the success of Bridges in the region, which has a long and rich history of collaboration. In deciding which to invite into the Bridges planning process, the convener had to weigh the relative strengths of each potential partner against the possibility that either the politics in the region or at any one agency might overwhelm the planning process. The convener concluded that too-heavy reliance on one or two partners could be fatal if, as the process became more demanding and the rigors of Bridges operations and research were more widely understood, one or another opted to back out. So the convener elected to build the group with a larger-than-typical number of agency partners on the theory that each could contribute a lot to Bridges, while the loss of any would not bring the process or the project to a halt.

Bridges challenges agencies, used to doing business in certain ways, to do things in new ways; so far they seem to be succeeding. We do not idealize the collaborative; we recognize that even the best may not be able to overcome all the resistance its members retain, legitimately or not, to ceding power and control (and funding) to those from different, and differing, jurisdictions and geographies within a region. Even as we prepare this report, Bridges sites struggle with management, staffing and other issues that arise as the demonstration gets up steam. At every one of the sites, though, even while a commitment to finding a regional solution to spatial mismatch has not eliminated all strain, and some vestiges of territorialism remain, one convener has said that the Bridges structure has worked so far because it challenged the sites to organize around a firm concept—not just a rhetorically noble goal—while enabling "each partner agency to accomplish something it was individually motivated to achieve" and to "advance its individual objectives collectively."

During the planning and pilot phases, of course, success may rely on elements different from those required for success during implementation. For instance, during the early phases, the convener at each site played the major role, guiding the group's activities and decisions. As the sites make the transition into full-fledged operations and research, each project is run by a project director and a staff who operate, for the most part, out of a single agency designated to manage the project. So far, all five conveners and collaboratives retain a strong presence. What remains to be seen is whether and how a transition from convener and collaborator to project staff takes place and what, if any, issues arise as former collaborators and conveners play a reduced role.

Bridging the physical barrier between the poor and job opportunities in the suburbs

We expected that bridging the physical gap between poverty and opportunity would have been easy to achieve: in a world rich—rife, even—with cars, buses, vans and rail, we thought, the mechanics of the targeted commute would be first to fall into place. As the federal government moved to consolidate the nation's transit, highway, land-use and other policies and funding under ISTEA—the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act—we believed that Bridges would have broad appeal to those charged with reshaping the planning and provision of transit in major metropolitan regions.

We were wrong. At the worst, we and the sites realized that some public transit agencies and MPOs (Metropolitan Planning Organizations) had no interest in city-to-suburb commuting as an antipoverty strategy. At best, we found that some did, but are locked—by tradition, timing and funding limits—into traditional methods of transit planning and could not be persuaded to support Bridges' innovative, border-crossing approach. So, early on, the sites moved toward what has become a variety of Bridges

"targeted commute" mechanisms, three involving public transit to a degree but not exclusively, two using only nonpublic providers.

In nearly every case, the local choice has required players to work together in ways entirely new to them and to learn new kinds of information and vocabularies. The sites have by and large managed it well so far, but nowhere without hard work and commitment, and almost nowhere without signs of strain and even conflict as each seeks to develop a sound transportation plan to connect its Bridges "Origin" (the single city neighborhood in which Bridges participants must reside) to its "Destination" (the job-rich area of the suburbs in which Bridges participants will work).

Sometimes the seemingly simplest issues have engendered the fiercest debates. For example, at the threshold of transportation planning at some Bridges sites lay the question of where Bridges participants should be picked up for their rides to work—at their homes, on street corners or at other collection points in the Origin, at a child-care center where Bridges parents would take their children, or some other spot? Which would be most efficient and cost-effective? But what started out as an inquiry into transportation service planning and management became something else. Some argued that it was not fair to ask Bridges participants, already laboring under significant deficits, to travel on their own to the Bridges pick-up point. What if they have to walk dangerous streets in their neighborhoods? Why should they not have the same conveniences as those of us who have cars in our driveways?

Bridges planners have argued, too, about the appropriateness of requiring Bridges participants to pay for their targeted commutes to work. In a focus group at one Bridges site, collaborators listened to some, including poor people and social services professionals, assert that a Bridges participant, newly employed and facing enough other challenges as he or she heads for the suburban frontier, should not have to

spend even a small portion of earnings on the commute, and that the fare requirement would be a disincentive to participation in the program. On the other side, some said that transportation—whether bus, train or car—is one of the inevitable costs of being a working person and that Bridges participants should be expected to deal with it from the start.

What has emerged is a variety of fare strategies, sometimes grounded in an uneasy truce over these complicated issues. At one site, Bridges riders will receive full fare subsidies while they participate in the program; at the other sites, riders will pay some or all of the fare for their daily rides, with fare subsidies decreasing at some sites over time. In some sites, Bridges riders will embark for work at their own doors; in most places, though, they will start their ride at another point in their neighborhood.

The issues brought up by transportation planning have exposed the players to new challenges and information. Those who come to Bridges from a tradition of serving the poor have had to learn that train and bus routes and schedules tend to change, if at all, only after costly and lengthy analysis and revision, and only when the transportation provider believes that ridership and market share will increase. On the other side, transit providers who are members of the Bridges collaboratives may or may not become advocates for the poor. They apparently see Bridges as good business, but they will have to deal with labor market factors, including unannounced shift changes, overtime requirements and the like, as these partnerships progress.

At one Bridges site, the transportation provider, who is an experienced private operator, has clashed with the project's job developer, a just-as-experienced employment professional, over the location of jobs recently developed for Bridges participants. The transportation operator says that the jobs are so widely dispersed across the site's Destination that, in these early months of the effort at least, the targeted commute covers too many miles and takes too long and so

serves neither riders nor employers well.

The job developer, on the other hand, asserts that the jobs are just the kind the project must develop to succeed, and that the provider should deal with the dispersal. The collaborative is working hard to resolve the tension and to enable each of these key Bridges partners to hear what the other has to say.

At the three sites where public transit will provide some or all Bridges services, Bridges riders will use existing, scheduled public bus and light rail, combined with circulator van services where necessary in the Origin or Destination to complete the targeted commute. In the two other sites, all Bridges transportation will be provided by for-profit providers who see Bridges as the ideal laboratory in which to develop and expand their paratransit operations and market shares, serving Bridges Origins (dense city neighborhoods) and Destinations (suburban office and industrial complexes) where physical and labor market conditions render large buses cumbersome in size and inflexible in routing and scheduling.

Bridging the social barriers between the poor and employment in the suburbs

Some of the biggest disagreements among the players at the sites have arisen over that piece of Bridges that gets the least amount of funding and ranks third among our three key elements—support services. We encouraged the sites to plan for and allocate a small portion of their operations funding to such things as child-care subsidies, emergency rides home and a limited array of strategies that a site might adopt to enable Bridges participants to overcome what some call resistance, others racism, in their new suburban workplaces. We discouraged more, though, because of our conviction that the enhanced services of Bridges should be aimed at solving the problems caused by spatial mismatch, not aimed at solving all the problems related to unemployment or underemployment among urban job-seekers.

Both during planning and pilot, some fierce debates have waged over how much—or how little—Bridges should provide by way of support services. Very soon, the corollary questions came up: just how “work-ready” is someone who has a lot of support service needs; and what could and should Bridges do, and not do, for those seeking work in the suburbs?

In its earliest incarnation, the debate arose over one site’s plan to fund, through its support services budget, fees for extended child care, professional licenses, tools and uniforms, and emergency rent and utility allowances; and of another’s to fund family crisis counseling and substance abuse interventions. The rationale was the same in both instances, and it was not unsound: all sorts of things besides the lack of a ride and placement information may conspire to keep a poor person from finding work in the first place or from sustaining a job once found. Any of a number of unexpected events, they argued—a baby-sitter falls ill, a tool belt is stolen, an employer requires all workers to wear expensive steel-toed shoes, a family member’s substance abuse threatens the stability of the household—could derail a worker who, albeit determined and willing, has no nest egg or safety net.

Despite the persuasiveness of this position, we decided to stay with limited support services. This would ensure that the focus of the Bridges demonstration would remain on the changes in the wages and earnings of the participants who make these new suburban connections, not on the effects of a wide array of supports that job-seekers may well need but that do not relate specifically to the location of their new employment in the suburbs.

But recently, with the projects virtually fully staffed at each site and ready to move from planning to implementation, the debate has been renewed, focused this time on the highly charged issue of just whom Bridges serves and how to best serve them. Or put another way, if the basic hypothesis of Bridges is right—that there is in each of our cities a large pool of adults who, but for the lack of

information about suburban jobs and transportation to those jobs, are work-ready—then shouldn’t Bridges projects need to provide few, not many, supports?

But what kind of supports, even limited ones, are appropriate and necessary? For instance, what kind and amount of support should Bridges give to urban residents who encounter the Big R—call it resistance or racism—in the suburban workplace? On one side are those Bridges staffers, ardent and experienced, who assert that Bridges should provide a full range of supportive services to their clients. Some have taken the position, for example, that Bridges staff must act aggressively when racism appears in a Bridges workplace, demanding that the employer offer diversity training to workers, or provide time and facilities for crisis intervention counseling.

But not all agree. In response to that very comment, another Bridges staffer said: “No, it’s our job to make sure that the participant gets a good job and earns a good wage. I don’t care if they wind up being friends with their coworkers, or if their boss ever understands or accepts black culture. That’s not what this is about and this isn’t the place to take care of all those problems.”

So the debate goes on, between two Bridges staff constituencies: those professionals who support intense advocacy for their job-seeking clients not only in regard to employment but in regard to health, family relations, culture and race, and the like; and those who believe that the right amount of intervention for a truly work-ready Bridges participant is the least amount needed to obtain and sustain a job that leads to real increases in wages and earnings.

Whether we call them “support services” or something else, we expect that discussion will continue over the types and level of assistance necessary to sustain these new city-suburb relationships and that Bridges will enable us to discover useful information about them.

CONCLUSION

If successful, the Bridges to Work strategy holds potential benefits in a number of areas: increased regional collaboration; improved placement capacity for employment and training providers; cost-effective service delivery options for social service agencies; new markets for public transportation systems; new sources of workers for employers and jobs for the urban poor. As evidence of this promise, some policymakers already see Bridges to Work as an important welfare reform strategy. The coincidental timing of HUD's announcement of Bridges and the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act has triggered calls for the application of Bridges' strategies for assisting welfare recipients to become self-sufficient.

However, at this point in the demonstration, important questions loom about whether and how the promise of Bridges can be fulfilled. For example, is the Bridges to Work strategy, with its limited support services and emphasis on the private labor market, a realistic approach to lifting from poverty welfare recipients and others among the long-term unemployed? As this report is being written, some of the Bridges to Work sites are worrying that welfare reform could overwhelm their ability to recruit and place the strongest job candidates in newly developed suburban jobs.

Also, even if the Bridges to Work demonstration is successful, can the model be implemented more broadly without major policy and funding shifts in large public systems (transportation, social services and employment/training) and more creativity and flexibility than we have seen in the field to date?

These and other major policy questions will need to be answered over the next four years before we learn the real value of the Bridges to Work approach. In the meantime, the five sites beginning the Bridges to Work pilot are grappling with immediate, fundamental concerns: complex operations, demanding research requirements, new relationships and an uncertain policy environment. They're off to a promising start. Succeeding field reports will chronicle developments in these areas as the full demonstration unfolds.

PUBLIC/PRIVATE VENTURES is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve social policies and programs in both the public and private sectors, especially as they relate to youth and young adults. P/PV designs, tests and evaluates initiatives that increase supports and opportunities for residents of low-income communities; and provides training and technical assistance to policymakers and practitioners.

- *We develop or identify strategies, models and practices that promote success in education, life skills and employment;*
- *We assess the effectiveness of new approaches, and analyze their critical elements and challenges, using rigorous research methodologies;*
- *We mine research results and implementation experiences for their policy implications, and communicate the findings to local, state and federal government decision-makers, and to leaders of the nonprofit and business sectors; and*
- *We create the building blocks—model policies, financing approaches, curricula, training materials and technical expertise—that are necessary to implement new approaches more broadly, to build staff capacity and strengthen basic institutions.*

P/PV's current work encompasses both programs that respond to the needs of individuals, and community and institutional change efforts that strengthen supports and opportunities for all.

To carry out this work, P/PV's staff of experienced researchers, program developers and managers—supported by national and local foundations, corporations, and local, state and federal government agencies—work with community organizations, private employers, schools, employment and training organizations, state and local public agencies.

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